

## ***Balclutha* Stop**

### **#19 Danger and Adventure on the High Seas**

You're listening to "Maritime Voices" from San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. I'm ranger Mark Neuweld. In this episode, we'll consider the dangers and adventures of sailing on the high seas.

In January, 1887, *Balclutha* sailed from South Wales with 30 men and 2,650 tons of coal. The terrifying passage around Cape Horn to San Francisco might last up to five months. Far from shore, a ship is like an isolated island. *Balclutha* and her crew would survive only through the skill and courage of those aboard. *Balclutha's* figurehead, an anonymous classical lady, may have provided comfort for those who looked to her as the eyes of the ship, a guide through the ferocious storms ahead.

For a sailor, the long months at sea were harsh and lonely, full of discomfort and deprivation. Their food consisted of weevil-infested biscuits, thin pea soup, and salt pork so hard "it would take a good polish." Their sleeping quarters were located in the bow of the ship, in the forecabin, a three-cornered hole that was dark, cold, wet, and smelly. Andrew Furuseth describes his sailor's life in these words, "...in jail my bunk would be no narrower, my food no worse nor I more lonely than in the forecabin." In their hard bunks, sailors slept in fear of a collision that could quickly kill them.

And their daily work in the rigging high above the deck also could quickly kill them. The following passage from a sailor's diary describes working aloft in a hard squall: "We climbed into the shrouds at 6 a.m. in pitch darkness. It was raining steadily and big seas were coming aboard. The wind had a cold sting in it, which gradually froze us to the marrow. We were up there for nearly two hours. Our fingers were stiff and blue with cold and red with blood from tears on jagged wire rope."

To a sailor surrounded by the 80 foot swells and 100 mile/hour winds of Cape Horn, the ocean must have been a formidable barrier, separating him from the safety, comfort, and loved ones of home.

Why did they sign on for such misery? Since *Balclutha's* sailors were paid only \$12-\$20 a month, perhaps they were seeking something more than money. Sailor Norman Pearce expresses his yearning for adventure in these words, "I was born and bred...with the love of the sea in my bones, and with several uncles...in the coasting trade, I just had to follow them. It was not long before I craved for something more, with square-rigged ships and foreign travel..."

Today, the National Park Service preserves not only the *Balclutha*, but also the stories of her sailors, including their dreams and their struggles for survival.